

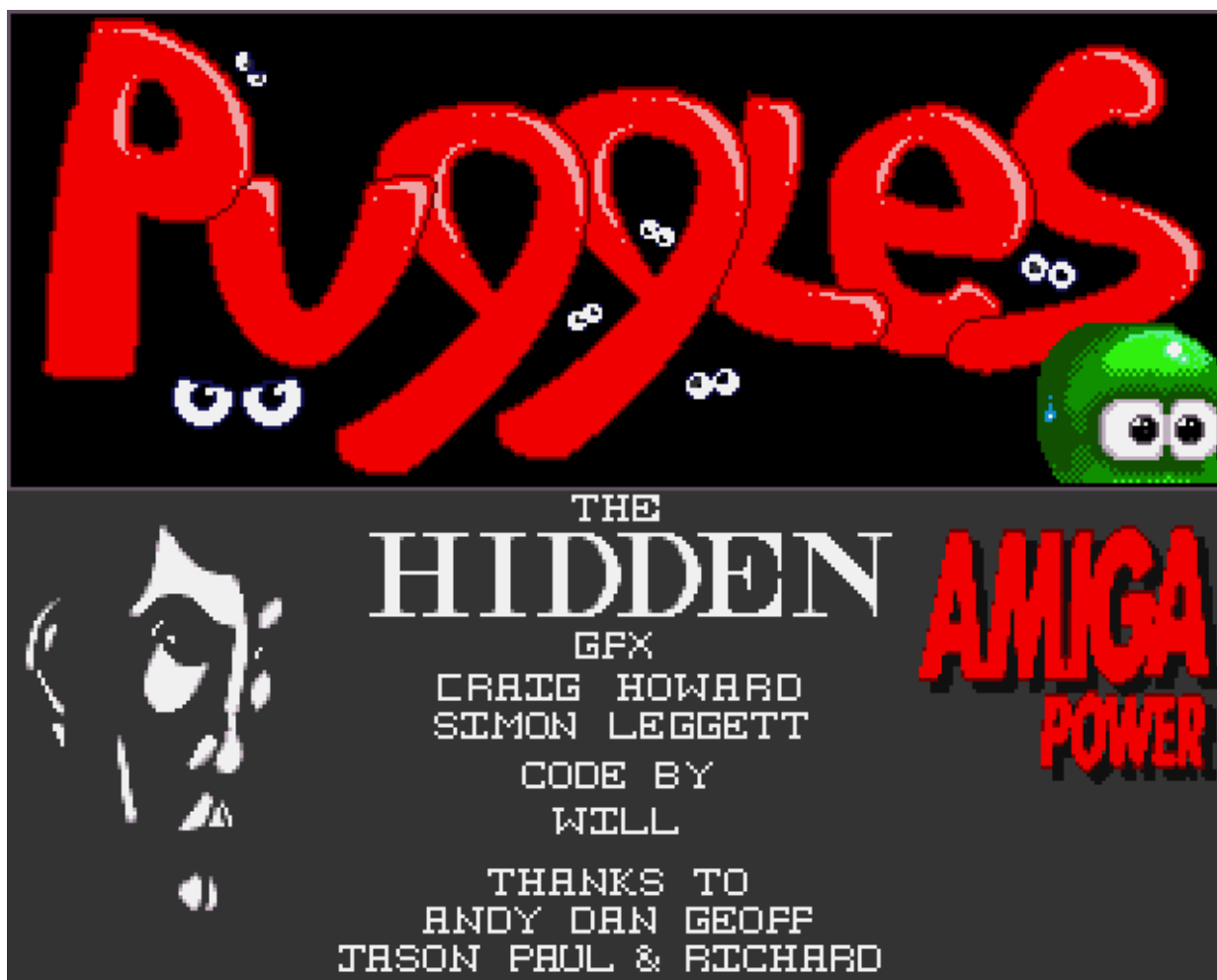
# Spodland lives!

Written by dreamkatcha. Any related videos, as always, can be found on my YouTube channel.

None of this would have been possible without the fantastic resources generously provided by immensely talented emulator authors, and communities such as Hall of Light, Lemon Amiga, Lemon 64, World of Spectrum, Moby Games, World of Longplays and Recorded Amiga Games. Thank you for your tireless dedication to preserving the history of gaming.

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Bygone PD game developers, The Hidden, are most fondly remembered for being the not-so-covert team behind the samurai duck warrior formerly known as Dong. Nevertheless, thanks to their close ties with Amiga Power they also managed to wangle two examples of their wares onto the cover disks of the best selling and most irreverent Amiga games magazine of the era. Delivered with AP9 was Puggles - a Q\*bert clone - while puzzle game, Rome, featured on one of AP12's cover disks, and Top Secret - a not even *thinly* veiled Rodland rip-off - made its debut glued to AP17.



Having aligned themselves with the 'Norfolk Dumplings', Amiga Power lavished everything the quartet churned out with fawning praise, whether justified or not. Thus it came as no great surprise when Amiga Power launched a 'Design A Game' contest in August 1992 (AP16), that The Hidden were at the forefront of the promotion, hailed as shining examples of game-creating success stories.

Coder William Bell, graphicicians Craig Howard and Simon Leggett, and musician Carl Jermy were tasked with adopting the winning reader's design concept and transforming it into a playable public domain title. The entire readership of the magazine - calculated to be 50,222 between July and December 1992 - would have the opportunity to play it via a

cover-mounted floppy disk without any obligation to make an additional purchase. So even *without* the carrot on a stick of a prize, the stakes were pretty high. Hiked further by the icing on the cake of an Amiga 600 with a hard drive and a copy of AMOS.

See what I did there? I tricked you into thinking there was no prize and then yanked the sheet away from the magicians' podium, revealing a gleaming new computer, dazzling you with Photoshopped lens flare, to escalate the drama and anticipation. Anywaaaaaaay...

Zillions of imaginative entries were received before the 30th September 1992 deadline, and subsequently whittled down to a shortlist of just 11 in time to announce the results in AP21 (published in January 1993).

'Spodland' by Martin Fox of Banchory snatched the no. 1 spot. It was described as a "funny little arcade battle game, featuring lots of little cute fluffy creatures called 'Spods', who while away the long summer days in Spodland, er, spitting at each other. A very simple concept with lots of extra stuff bolted on to keep it interesting, and one of the few *multi-player* designs we got."

Development work commenced immediately, the first 'Diary of a Game' article documenting its progress appearing in Amiga Power's February 1993 issue. In most of the ensuing issues published each month we'd revisit the project for a catch-up. These appeared right up until December 1993, while AP expanded the series to include 'the making of' Sensible Software titles such as Cannon Fodder and Sensible Golf.



As Martin's initial proposal was so light on substantial detail, The Hidden had many gaps to plug in order to flesh out the skeleton of a game. One thing company founder and graphician, Craig Howard, tacked on was one of those plotty contraptions games are expected to possess. To quote him this entailed the "Spods going on a quest to become the Good King Wargle's Master of Spods. They all go through a series of knockout tournaments until there's only one left who then becomes King of the Spods."

Said tale was set to unravel courtesy of a benevolent old wizard crouched over a mystical desk, with illustrations conjured up using a crystal ball.

After experimenting with various console style, cutesy aesthetics, the decision was taken to instead veer off in an entirely different, highly ambitious direction. Craig's masterplan was to hire a third party to sculpt the Spod creatures from plasticine and digitise them using Claymation techniques. He expected the result to look something like

Morph from the Hartbeat children's art tuition show hosted by the late Tony Hart. To ensure he was on the right track, Craig consulted the advice of fellow game developers, Dome Software, who gifted us with the gaming adaptation of Arnie's Last Action Hero. The less said about that the better. They weren't exactly thrilled with the prospect, leading Craig to doubt his commitment to the technique. Unsettled he continued.



3D FMV sequences, rotoscoping, and the conversion of HAM images to 32 colour digitised pictures of celebrities, all featured in the impromptu design brief. Reigning in the elaborate strategy, the game was to be a single screen affair, eliminating the need for resource-intensive smooth scrolling.

Accordingly, sprites were to occupy a modest screen real estate of 32x32 pixels.

A number of sub-games were sketched out, including one comprised of spitting at celebs, and a gold-protecting diversion described as being similar to the 'crush a crab' machines found in arcades. I wonder if that's Norfolk's answer to 'whack a mole'.

Chief coder, William Bell, stretched between stitching together Simon and Craig's Spodland graphics and Carl's audio contribution, and bringing Donk to life, naturally struggled to keep up. Rather than abandon or postpone one project or the other, Craig drafted in the cavalry in the form of programmer Paul Douglas. The same Paul Douglas who would go on to become lead programmer of the first Tomb Raider title, and the gold edition that followed two years later in 1998.

As 1994 got underway, news of Spodland's evolution dried up overnight like a puddle in the Sahara, sidelined by the Sensi crew's insider game inception revelations. As far as I can establish its name was never uttered again. Well, not in any fashion that furthered our knowledge of its existence. Did it *ever* exist? Was it all a figment of our collective imagination? A protracted recurring dream maybe?

In February 1995 Adam Noble of Hove wrote in to AP's 'Do the Write Thing' section to ask "What happened to Spodland? Are The Hidden still working on it, or have they given up? It did seem an interesting game, so if they ever finish it, will it be on your coverdisk?

We got an answer... and were none the wiser. AP replied "Spodland? We really don't know, but will no doubt tell you if anything interesting ever happens." Pfft!

The Hidden didn't die in a horrific plane crash or retreat to an underground bunker to... erm, *hide*, they simply switched their focus to other projects... or rather *continued* working on the special edition, CD32 version of Donk. In fact, they spent so much time talking about Donk's headway during their 'Diary of a *Spodland*' articles it's really no wonder the ninja quacker took precedence.



Donk was to be The Hidden's one and only commercial release, seeing as the formula 1 arcade racer/sim the team previewed in 1994 never came to fruition. 'The Big End' (yes, *really*) was likely canned due to its poor financial potential in a dying market.

Elucidating the brainstorming process that lead to settling on the innuendo-rife title, Craig Howard, in issue 71 of The One magazine, published in September 1994, divulged...

"It took us ages to think of 'The Big End'. It's got a great double-meaning, and the boss really likes it. We're planning to do a rally game next, which was going to be called Muck 'n' Rubber; maybe we'll carry on with it at some point."

All that remains of The Big End aka 'The Big Engine' is an extremely primitive preview, which can be found demonstrated on YouTube. Craig, who uploaded the video, reveals that the source has been lost, though he *may* consider trying to reverse engineer the compiled output if there's sufficient interest... and there *has* been. There's a 10-page thread on the subject over on the English Amiga Board. Sadly, all the effort made to salvage the arcade racer featuring basic management elements amounted to practically nothing.





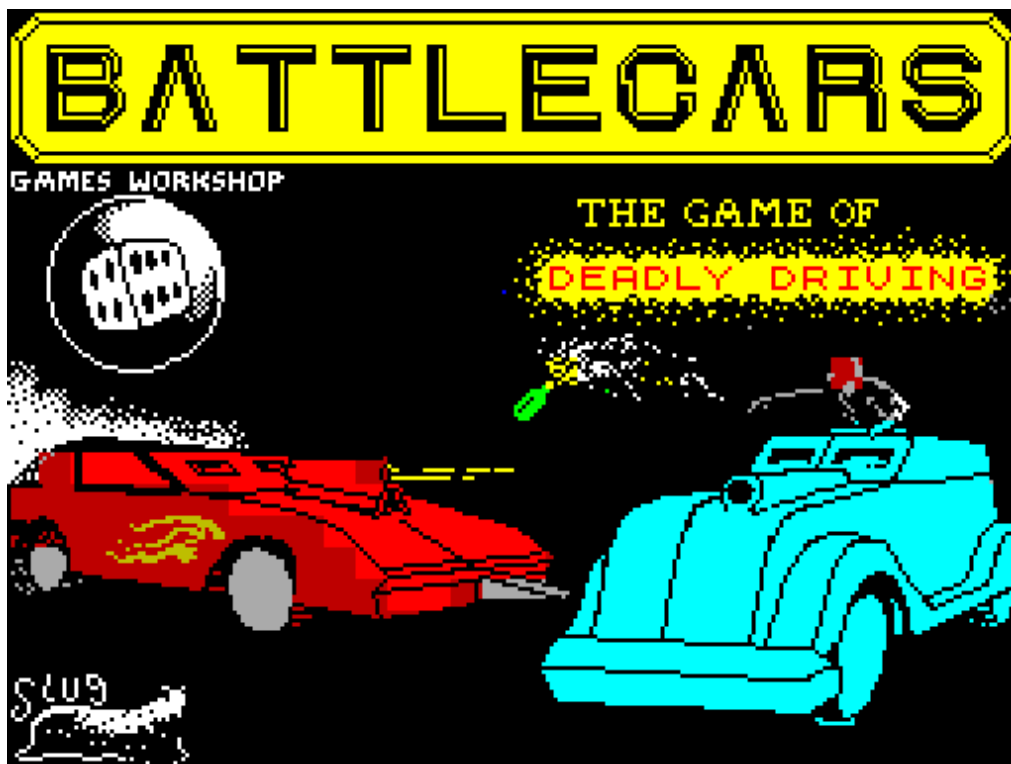
In one diary entry, The Hidden disclosed that they were also working on a Smash TV clone called 'Monster Mash'. Like Spodland *that* never materialised. 'Smash TV: The Rip Off' had already been done very effectively by this stage so possibly that was what deterred its completion. Aside from any copyright issues they may have faced owing to their greater notoriety in comparison to your average bedroom-bound shareware developers.

Out of curiosity, I checked to see what became of the games blue-printed by the shortlisted runners up.

*Nothing* apparently. I couldn't find a scrap of evidence that *any* of them emerged as fully-fledged playable games. I was especially heartbroken to discover that Matthew Thomas'

'Transformer-ish Robots Kick David Icke's Butt' never got off the starting blocks. A bizarre, random title you may assume until you stumble across the competition's list of entry stipulations. The most critical one being, "David Icke is not eligible to enter".

One was actually disqualified soon after being singled out for praise when it transpired that 'Battle Cars' was plagiarised from the Spectrum game of the same name developed by SLUG and published by Games Workshop in 1984.



Tim Genge - 'designer' of Battle Cars - went on to become a senior software architect at RealmSoft so it's safe to say he survived the controversy relatively unscathed.

Michael Brockbank who submitted a "cross between Captive and Laser Squad" known as Rebellion is now a Senior Project Manager working for Acclimation in Melbourne.

I found no trace of the remaining contestants. Nothing that would allow me to say with certainty that I'd identified the right people anyway. As for the triumphant, Martin Fox, he now works in the Digital Technology division for Baker Hughes in Aberdeen. I contacted him to see if he can shed any light on the enigmatic demise of his winning entry, however, he hasn't returned my messages so I'll have to file this one in my 'to be continued' drawer, along with all the other Games That Weren't.

Getting by on a technicality, Spodland *did* kind of break free from the sketchpad in the form of Andrew Crowe's homage to The Hidden's vision in the form of 'Spodland II Turbo'. It's described as "a fun multi-player spit-um-up". You can find a playthrough video on YouTube, and the game itself - released in 1997 - can be downloaded from Aminet.

How accurately it measures up to what The Hidden were working on four years earlier - commissioned by Amiga Power - is anyone's guess, yet Andrew appears to have studied the diaries diligently and done his best to implement the core elements discussed.

By way of the title screen, Andrew cites Martin as the inaugurator of Spodland, and therefore the inspiration behind his off-shoot. I hope that's of some consolation for The Hidden's shambolic vanishing act.